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Energy Harvesting for Soft-Matter Machines and Electronics

Carmel Majidi
CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY

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Final Report

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14. ABSTRACT
Air Force (AF) materials capable of dramatic changes in shape and rigidity require soft-matter electronics that support functionality without
interfering with the mechanics of the host structure. In this program, I introduced a new class of soft multifunctional materials that can be used to
power these systems by converting elastic strain energy from large deformations into electricity. These materials are composed of soft elastomers
embedded with a suspension of liquid metal (LM) droplets that control the electrical properties of the composite. Depending on their composition
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twists, or bends under external loading. This external loading may arise from air drag, wind, ambient vibrations, collisions, etc. and represents
mechanical work that would be otherwise dissipated through damping.

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FINAL PERFORMANCE REPORT
Reporting Period: 3/15/2015 – 3/14/2016

Energy Harvesting for Soft-Matter Machines and Electronics (YIP ‘13)

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Final Report
Mechanics of Multifunctional Materials & Microsystems

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Grant Title: Energy Harvesting for Soft-Matter Machines and Electronics (YIP '13)

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Objectives: Elastically-soft architectures and materials for converting mechanical deformation from vibrations and stretching into electrical energy. Specific tasks include

1. Theoretical modeling of dielectric elastomer generators (DEGs) using nonlinear constitutive laws. [Y1, Y2]
2. Development of soft (0.1-1 MPa) conductive (~10^4 S/m) and high-k (ε_r ~ 10-50) dielectric elastomers. [Y1-Y3]
3. Measurement of electromechanical coupling between stretch and electrical resistivity of conductive elastomers or permittivity of insulating high-k dielectrics; demonstration of vibrational energy harvesting. [Y3]

Y3 Executive Summary

Y3 efforts focused on completing the design and characterization of a new class of soft multifunctional materials for electrostatic energy harvesting. The materials are designed to function as electrodes and dielectrics for an elastically deformable capacitor that changes its stored electrical enthalpy when subject to mechanical loading [Ref. 5]. In this final year of the project, a novel self-priming generator was also introduced. Preliminary measurements obtained with this testbed demonstrate that the soft multifunctional composite can be integrated into an energy harvesting system and has the potential to improve electrical power output.

High-k Dielectric Elastomer

As reported in the previous annual report, the electric properties of soft elastomers can be tailored by adding a suspension of liquid metal (LM) droplets. Depending on their composition, these LM-embedded elastomer (LMEE) can exhibit either high electric conductivity (σ ~ 10^4 S/m; Ref. 2) or permittivity (ε_r ~ 10-50; Ref. 1). Such materials can be used as electrodes and dielectrics, respectively, in a soft-matter capacitive generator that converts mechanical work into electrostatic energy through changes in

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capacitance and electrical enthalpy. Because the inclusions are liquid phase, these LM-embedded elastomer (LMEE) composites exhibit the same mechanical properties of unfilled rubber – low elastic modulus (0.1-1 MPa), high strain limit (up to 600%), and low mechanical hysteresis. Such properties are required in order for the generator to support large elastic deformations and maximize electrical enthalpy change.

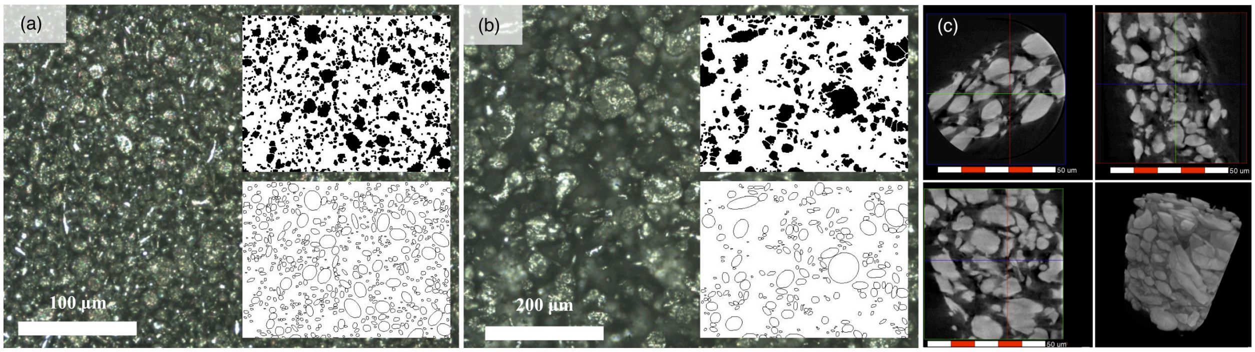

Fig. 1 Optical images of (a) EGaIn-PU ($\phi = 0.5$) and (b) EGaIn-PDMS ($\phi = 0.2$) composites; insets show results of image processing to identify LM inclusions and estimate dimensions of an ellipsoidal fitting. (c) 3D X-Ray Nano-CT image of a Galinstan-PDMS composite.

The dielectric composites are composed of either polydimethylsiloxane (PDMS) or polyurethane (PU) embedded with a non-percolating suspension of LM microdroplets. Gallium-based alloys such as Ga-In-Sn and Ga-In eutectic (EGaIn) are used as the liquid metal. Referring to the optical and Nano-CT images in **Fig. 1**, the LM suspension is polydisperse and has a random but statistically uniform spatial distribution. Despite the high volume fraction (ϕ) of LM, the droplets do not form a percolating network and instead function as an "artificial dielectric" that significantly increases the effective electric permittivity (ε_r) of the composite. In the case of $\phi = 0.5$, ε_r is 4× greater than the permittivity of the unfilled elastomer (ε_m). Measurements of the normalized permittivity $\varepsilon_r/\varepsilon_m$ are plotted in **Fig. 2a**. The solid curve represents a theoretical prediction based on the Maxwell-Garnett effective medium approximation. The strong agreement between the experiment and theory without the aid of data fitting gives compelling evidence for the non-percolating dispersion model of the LM inclusions.

Electromechanical testing is performed using a benchtop LCR meter (BK Precision 889B) that is synchronized with an Instron 5969 tensile tester (**Fig. 2b**). Measurements are performed on a stretchable parallel-plate capacitor composed of a LMEE dielectric and EGaIn electrodes sealed in an additional layer of silicone (figure inset). The capacitance C is observed to increase monotonically with stretch (λ). In the case of pure uniaxial loading ($\lambda_1 = \lambda$, $\lambda_2 = \lambda_3 = \lambda^{-1/2}$), we expect $C/C_0 = \lambda$, where C_0 is the capacitance at 0% strain. However, this appears to overpredict the measured increase, suggesting that either the volumetric permittivity ε_r is decreasing (black markers) or boundary effects are interfering with the transverse stretches. Further testing is required to determine the source of this discrepancy. Lastly, the greatest permittivity is measured with urethane-based LMEEs (**Fig. 2c**), which, like the silicone-based composites, exhibit a low dielectric loss tangent (**Fig. 2d**). The latter suggests that the composites are reliable insulators with negligible leakage over a broad range of frequencies.

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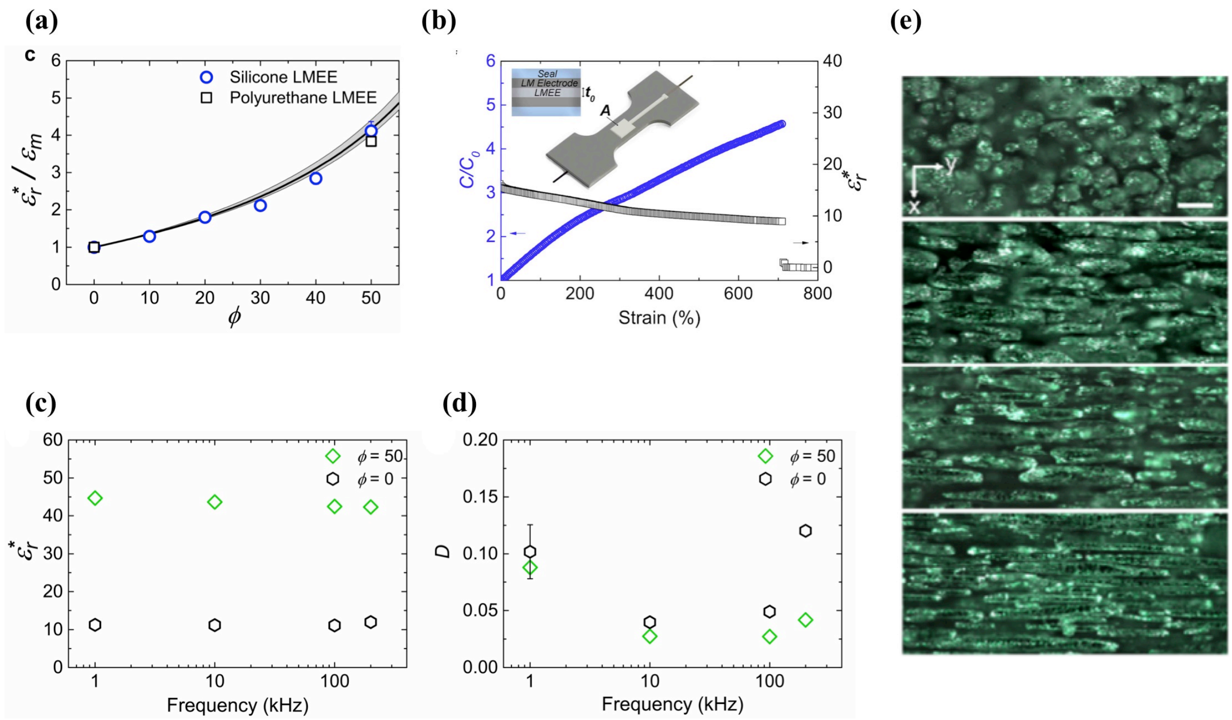

Fig. 2 (a) Plot of relative permittivity versus volume fraction loading of liquid metal (ϕ) in silicone and urethane; the solid curve and shaded bounds correspond to a theoretical prediction based on Equ. (4.2) with an independently measured inclusion aspect ratio of $p = r_3/r_1 = 1.49 \pm 0.36$. (b) Relative change in capacitance of an LMEE dielectric as a function of strain; the black markers correspond to the effective permittivity for a parallel plate capacitor under pure uniaxial load. (c) Plot of dielectric constant as a function of testing frequency for ϕ = 0 and 0.5 showing an increase of over 400% for a filled versus unfilled urethane matrix. (d) Plot of dielectric dissipation factor as a function of testing frequency showing the low dissipation of a urethane-based LMEE. Error bars = ± 1 s.d. and error bars smaller than symbol size are omitted. (e) Images of LM inclusions under strain – from top: 0%, 100%, 200%, 300% (scale bar = 25 μm).

Self-Priming Generator

To demonstrate the ability to harvest energy with an LMEE composite, we developed a self-priming generator testbed (**Fig. 3a**). The testbed is composed of a customized jig for dynamical materials analysis (DMA) and a sample holder for mounting a dielectric elastomer generator (DEG), which are labeled in **Fig. 3b**. Not shown in the figure are the PC interface, data acquisition board, sensor electronics, and self-priming circuit (SPC) for extracting excess electrical charge and priming the DEG. Our customized DMA is a novel design that incorporates a jig saw and Variac to deliver ~1-10 cm linear translational loading at 20-50 Hz frequency. This represents a reliable and inexpensive alternative to conventional DMA systems that allows greater versatility in applying mechanical loads and generating desired motions.

The self-priming circuit (SPC) is based on a design introduced in "Self-Priming Dielectric Elastomer Generators" by McKay, Anderson et al. (*Smart Mater. Struct.* 2015). It contains capacitors and high voltage (HV) diodes configured to manage charge on the surface electrodes as the DEG is cyclically loaded between strained (low voltage,

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high charge) and relaxed (high voltage, low charge) states. A zener diode is used to limit the maximum voltage on the dielectric and prevent electric breakdown. In parallel with the SPC and DEG is a sensor circuit containing a non-inverting level shifting op-amp and HV probe for measuring the voltage drop across the dielectric.

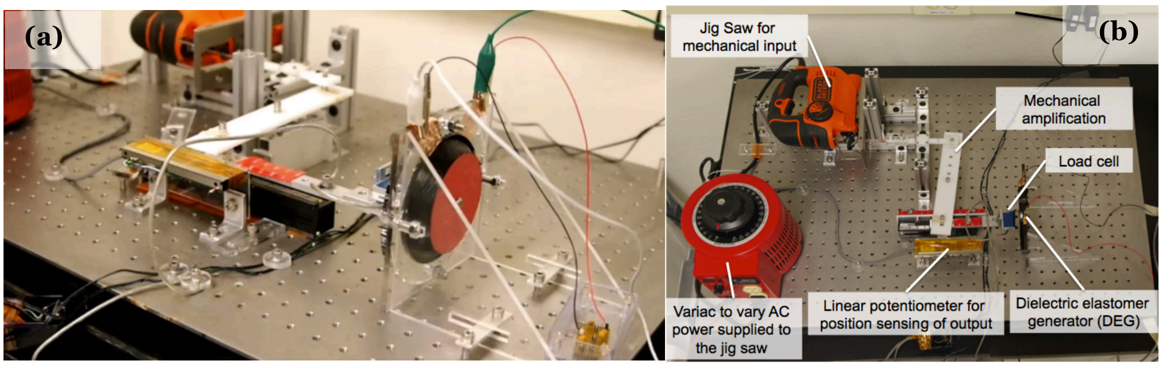

Fig. 3 Dielectric elastomer generator (DEG) testbed. (a) DEG diaphragm being loaded by a jig saw at 50 Hz. (b) Testbed setup composed of dynamical materials analysis (DMA) apparatus. Not shown in the image are the electronics for DEG priming and sensing.

Preliminary measurements obtained with the testbed are presented in **Fig. 4a**. The DEG is composed of an LMEE-PDMS dielectric (ϕ = 0.1) with a carbon grease coating for the electrodes. Mechanical loading is converted into electrostatic energy that scales with the harvested voltage shown in the plot. As shown, the voltage on the DEG exceeds 500V after 45s of cyclical loading. The plot in **Fig. 4b** shows load versus displacement for the DEG. The hysteresis between the loading and unloading corresponds to mechanical damping caused by (i) change in the "Maxwell stress" induced by electrostatic pressure and (ii) viscoelasticity of the dielectric. The area of the hysteresis loop that corresponds to electrostatic damping corresponds to the electrostatic energy generated for each loading cycle.

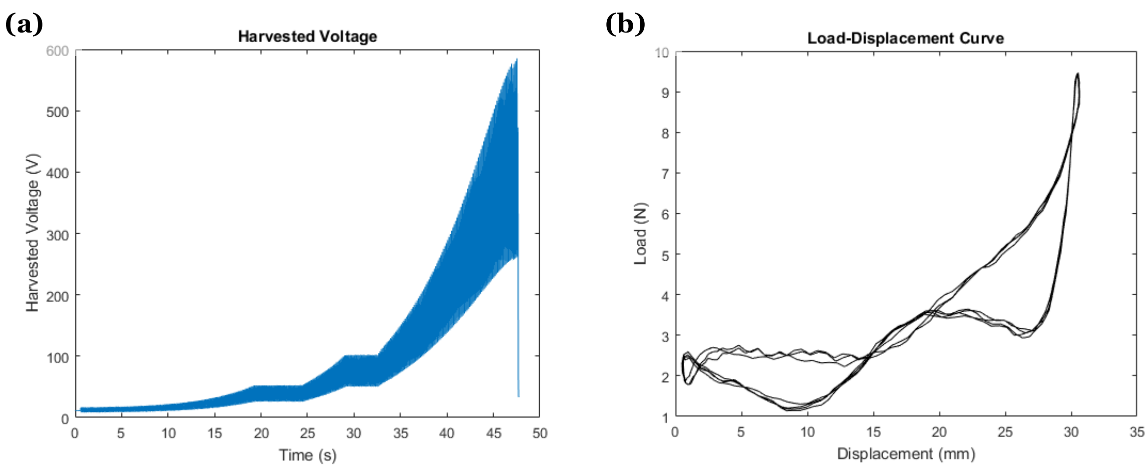

Fig. 4 Dielectric elastomer generator (DEG) testbed. (a) DEG diaphragm being loaded by a jig saw at 20 Hz. (b) Testbed setup composed of dynamical materials analysis (DMA) apparatus. Not shown in the image are the electronics for DEG priming and sensing.

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Future Directions

This YIP was successful in introducing a new class of soft multifunctional materials that can be used for energy harvesting. The results presented in Fig. 4 show that LM-embedded elastomer (LMEE) composites can function as a dielectric for converting cyclical mechanical loading into electrostatic energy. In addition to high electric permittivity, LMEEs can also be tailored to exhibit high electrical conductivity (see Y2 annual report). A near-term direction is to also explore enhanced thermal conductivity with LMEEs and examine how processing methods and pre-loading techniques can be used to "program" the shape of the LM inclusions and introduce electrical, thermal, and mechanical anisotropy.

Another future direction is to explore alternative material compositions and structures. This includes co-polymers and surfactants for controlling the size, monodispersity, and spatial distribution of the LM inclusions. Control on LM dispersion has the potential to lead to further improvements in electrical and thermal properties. This is especially true for electric breakdown strength, which scales inversely with inclusion size and is expected to increase with enhanced thermal conductivity.

Publications

[1] M. Bartlett, A. Fassler, N. Kazem, E. Markvicka, P. Mandal, C. Majidi, "Stretchable, high-k dielectric elastomers through liquid metal inclusions," *Advanced Materials* in press (2016).
[2] A. Fassler and C. Majidi, "Liquid-Phase Metal Inclusions for a Conductive Polymer Composite," Advanced Materials, 27: 1928–1932 (2015).
[3] N. Kazem, C. Majidi, C. Maloney, "Gelation And Mechanical Response Of Patchy Rods," *Soft Matter* **11** 7877-7887 (2015).
[4] T. Lu, J. Wissman, Ruthika, C. Majidi, "Soft Anisotropic Conductors as Electric Vias for Ga-Based Liquid Metal Circuits," *ACS Applied Materials & Interfaces* 7 26923–26929 (2015).
[5] A. Tutcuoglu, C. Majidi, "Energy Harvesting with Stacked Dielectric Elastomer Transducers: Nonlinear Theory, Optimization, and Linearized Scaling Law," *Applied Physics Letters* **105** 241905 (2014).

Patent Provisional

A. Fassler, M. Bartlett, N. Kazem, C. Majidi, "Liquid-Phase Metal Inclusions for a Conductive Polymer Composite," *USPTO*, filed December 2014.

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Abstract

Air Force (AF) materials capable of dramatic changes in shape and rigidity require soft-matter electronics that support functionality without interfering with the mechanics of the host structure. In this program, I introduced a new class of soft multifunctional materials that can be used to power these systems by converting elastic strain energy from large deformations into electricity. These materials are composed of soft elastomers embedded with a suspension of liquid metal (LM) droplets that control the electrical properties of the composite. Depending on their composition and microstructure, these LM-embedded elastomers (LMEEs) can be tailored to exhibit exceptionally high electric conductivity, electric permittivity, and/or thermal conductivity. LMEEs with high permittivity can function as high-k dielectrics for storing and harvesting electrostatic energy. When integrated with an elastically deformable AF structure, they have the potential to generate electricity as the host structure stretches, twists, or bends under external loading. This external loading may arise from air drag, wind, ambient vibrations, collisions, etc. and represents mechanical work that would be otherwise dissipated through damping. With electrostatic charge recovery using a self-priming circuit, the proposed materials have the potential to exhibit conversion efficiencies (electrical power output / mechanical power input) well above 50%. Moreover, since they are intrinsically soft and stretchable, they will not interfere with the ability of the host AF structure to change shape or elastic rigidity.

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Archival Publications (published) during reporting period:

[1] M. Bartlett, A. Fassler, N. Kazem, E. Markvicka, P. Mandal, C. Majidi, "Stretchable, high-k dielectric elastomers through liquid metal inclusions," Advanced Materials in press (2016).

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Do you have any discoveries, inventions, or patent disclosures to report for this period?

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Do you plan to pursue a claim for personal or organizational intellectual property?

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Research Objectives

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Supplies			
Total			

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